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THE POETRY OF LINCOLN

BY JAMES RAYMOND PERRY

THE title first selected for this article was "The Poems of Lincoln," but the title adopted is a little broader in meaning and more exactly descriptive of what the writer wishes to present. Perhaps a still more discriminatingly considered title would be, "The Poetic Quality of Lincoln's Addresses," for reference is not here made to such efforts in verse as his early lines treating of Adam and Eve, trivial in their nature; nor even of verses written in more serious mood, such as those prompted by the loss of reason of a youthful comrade or those called forth by revisiting in manhood the scenes of his childhood home. These earlier efforts are frankly rhymed and intentionally metrical, however far short they may fall of being truly poetical; whereas many of the later addresses—wholly unrhymed, of course, and not intentionally metrical—seem surcharged with poetry.

"Not intentionally metrical." Presumably in his prose addresses Lincoln did not consciously cast any part of them into metrical form, yet ever and again in the addresses the careful observer will discover whole lines, perhaps a succession of lines, in the iambic pentameter form—like the blank verse of Shakespeare and Milton. Take, for example, these lines from the Gettysburg Address:

"That from these honored dead we take increased
Devotion to that cause for which they gave
The last full measure of devotion; that . . ."

Here are three complete lines as flawless as if consciously and intentionally cast into the iambic pentameter form. Single lines are frequent, as witness these from his last public address:

"Must those whose harder part give us the cause . . ."

And:

“Was not in reach to take an active part.”

Or this from the First Inaugural Address:

“Suppose you go to war, you cannot fight . . .”

And this:

“We are not enemies, but friends. We must . . .”

Instances like these could be multiplied, no doubt; and their recurrence ever and again contributes unquestionably to the poetic quality so noticeable in the prose addresses. When the words are not cast into the pentameter form they often fall into other metrical divisions, as for example:

“But in a larger sense
We cannot dedicate,
We cannot consecrate,
We cannot hallow this ground.”

“The world will little note
Nor long remember what
We say here.”

“That from these honored dead.”

“Shall not have died in vain.”

When he wrote the Gettysburg Address, Lincoln was plainly in a highly exalted and poetical mood, for the language used clearly reflects inspiration and exaltation. Frequent as are the metrical forms in his prose and highly contributory as they are in giving to it a poetical quality, they nevertheless do not contribute its whole, nor, perhaps, even its chief poetical charm. That charm, of course, lies in the deep poetical feeling back of both form and words, the result of which is a poetical quality in his expression even when that expression shapes itself into unmetrical prose. Because of this poetical feeling in his prose long sections of some of his addresses may be read as poems.

Mr. R. W. Gilder, in his masterly “Lincoln the Leader,” speaking of Lincoln’s literary style, says:

“But Lincoln’s style might have had all these qualities and yet not have carried as it did. Beyond these traits comes the miracle—the cadence of his prose and its traits of pathos and of imagination. Lincoln’s prose, at its height and when his spirit was stirred by aspiration and resolve, affects the soul like noble music. Indeed, there may be found in all his great utterances a strain which is like the leading motive—the *Leit-motif*—in musical drama; a strain of mingled pathos, heroism and resolution. That is the strain in the two inaugurals, in the ‘Gettysburg Address,’ and in his

letter of consolation to a bereaved mother, which moves the hearts of generation after generation."

Portions of Lincoln's utterances are here lined off as if they were, indeed, blank verse. Casting them into such lines does not, of course, make them actually more poetical, but it does call attention more forcibly to the fact that they *are* poetical—in form as well as quality. The unmetrical prose is still there, to be sure; but even so, that musical cadence mentioned by Mr. Gilder is seldom absent.

In the subjoined examples it is not claimed that the division into verse lines is the best possible division they are capable of; a more practised eye might rearrange the lines so that the poetical form would be heightened.

THE FAREWELL ADDRESS AT SPRINGFIELD

"My Friends: No one not in my situation
Can appreciate my feeling of sadness at this parting.
To this place, and the kindness of these people,
I owe everything. Here I have lived a quarter of a century,
And have passed from a young to an old man.
Here my children have been born,
And one is buried. I now leave, not knowing when
Or whether ever I may return, with a task before me
Greater than that which rested upon Washington.
Without the assistance of that Divine Being
Who ever attended him I cannot succeed.
With that assistance I cannot fail.
Trusting Him, who can go with me
And remain with you, and be everywhere for good,
Let us confidently hope that all will yet be well.
To His care commending you, as I hope
In your prayers you will commend me,
I bid you an affectionate farewell."

The richly poetical quality of the foregoing lines must be apparent to every one.

In the next example, though the occasion itself might seem equally inspiring, if the mood seems less exalted, the diction less noble and the poetic quality less rich, it should be remembered that Lincoln said it was an unprepared speech, as he had not expected to be called on to say a word.

ADDRESS IN INDEPENDENCE HALL

"I am filled with deep emotion at finding myself
Standing in this place, where were collected together
The wisdom, the patriotism, the devotion to principle,
From which sprang the institutions under which we live. . . .

"I have never had a feeling, politically, that did not spring
 From the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence.
 I have often pondered over the dangers which
 Were incurred by the men who assembled here
 And framed and adopted that Declaration.
 I have pondered over the toils that were endured
 By the officers and soldiers of the army
 Who achieved that independence. I have often
 Inquired of myself what great principle or idea
 It was that kept this Confederacy so long together.
 It was not the mere matter of separation
 Of the colonies from the motherland, but that sentiment
 In the Declaration of Independence which gave liberty
 Not alone to the people of this country,
 But hope to all the world, for all future time.
 It was that which gave promise that in due time
 The weights would be lifted from the shoulders of all men,
 And that all should have an equal chance.
 This is the sentiment embodied in
 The Declaration of Independence.

Now, my friends,

Can this country be saved on that basis?
 If it can, I will consider myself one of the happiest
 Men in the world if I can help to save it.
 If it cannot be saved upon that principle
 It will be truly awful. But if this country
 Cannot be saved without giving up that principle,
 I was about to say I would rather be
 Assassinated on this spot than surrender it."

The poetic quality exists to a marked degree in the first inaugural and attains to a very high flight in the concluding lines of that address. Those lines impress one in much the same way and to quite the same degree as do some of the nobler passages from Shakespeare.

FIRST INAUGURAL ADDRESS

"I take the official oath to-day with no mental reservation,
 And with no purpose to construe the Constitution
 Or laws by any hypercritical rules.
 And while I do not choose now to specify
 Particular acts of Congress as proper to be enforced,
 I do suggest that it will be much safer for all,
 Both in official and private stations, to conform to
 And abide by all those acts which stand unrepealed,
 Than to violate any of them, trusting to find
 Impunity in having them held to be unconstitutional. . . .

"I hold that, in contemplation of universal law
 And the Constitution, the Union of these States
 Is perpetual. Perpetuity is implied,

If not expressed, in the fundamental law
 Of all national governments. It is safe
 To assert that no government proper ever had
 A provision in its organic law for its own
 Termination. Continue to execute all
 The express provisions of our National Constitution,
 And the Union will endure forever—
 It being impossible to destroy it except
 By some act not provided for in the instrument itself. . . .

“Physically speaking, we cannot separate.
 We cannot remove our respective sections from
 Each other, nor build an impassable wall
 Between them. A husband and wife may be divorced,
 And go out of the presence and beyond the reach
 Of each other; but the different parts
 Of our country cannot do this.
 They cannot but remain face to face,
 And intercourse, either amicable or hostile,
 Must continue between them. Is it possible, then,
 To make that intercourse more advantageous
 Or more satisfactory after separation than before?
 Can aliens make treaties easier than friends
 Can make laws? Can treaties be more faithfully enforced
 Between aliens than laws can among friends?
 Suppose you go to war, you cannot fight
 Always; and when after much loss on both sides,
 And no gain on either, you cease fighting,
 The identical old questions as to terms
 Of intercourse are again upon you. . . .

“In your hands, my dissatisfied fellow countrymen,
 And not in mine, is the momentous issue of civil war.
 The government will not assail you. You can have
 No conflict without being yourself the aggressors.
 You have no oath registered in heaven
 To destroy the government, while I shall have
 The most solemn one to ‘preserve, protect
 And defend it.’

I am loath to close.
 We are not enemies, but friends.
 We must not be enemies. Though passion
 May have strained, it must not break
 Our bonds of affection. The mystic chords
 Of memory, stretching from every battle-field
 And patriot grave to every living heart
 And hearthstone all over this broad land,
 Will yet swell the chorus of the Union
 When again touched, as surely they will be,
 By the better angels of our nature.”

After reading the passage just quoted, can any one doubt

that Abraham Lincoln, in addition to all his other greatness of heart and soul and mind, was also one of the world's great poets? That noble utterance on the field of Gettysburg—what is it but a great poem? It is here given in its entirety:

THE GETTYSBURG ADDRESS

“Fourscore and seven years ago
Our fathers brought forth upon this continent
A new nation conceived in liberty,
And dedicated to the proposition
That all men are created equal.

“Now we are engaged in a great civil war,
Testing whether that nation, or any nation
So conceived and so dedicated
Can long endure. We are met
On a great battle-field of that war.
We have come to dedicate a portion of
That field as a final resting-place
For those who here gave their lives
That that nation might live.
It is altogether fitting and proper
That we should do this.

But in a larger sense
We cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate,
We cannot hallow this ground. The brave men,
Living and dead, who struggled here,
Have consecrated it far above our power
To add or detract. The world will little note
Nor long remember what we say here,
But it can never forget what they did here.
It is for us, the living, rather, to be dedicated here
To the unfinished work which they who fought here
Have thus far so nobly advanced.
It is rather for us to be here dedicated
To the great task remaining before us;
That from these honored dead we take
Increased devotion to that cause for which
They gave the last full measure of devotion;
That we here highly resolve that these dead
Shall not have died in vain, that this nation,
Under God, shall have a new birth of freedom;
And that government of the people,
By the people, and for the people,
Shall not perish from the earth.”

Noble words, most nobly uttered and sure to live, in spite of that “nor long remember,” as long as the battle of Gettysburg itself remains in the memories of men!

Again he sings of freedom and equality of men in an address to the soldiers:

FROM AN ADDRESS TO THE 166TH OHIO REGIMENT

"It is not merely for to-day, but for all time to come,
That we should perpetuate for our children's children
That great and free government which we have enjoyed
All our lives. I beg you to remember this,
Not merely for my sake, but for yours.
I happen, temporarily, to occupy this White House.
I am a living witness that any one of your children
May look to come here as my father's child has.
It is in order that each one of you may have,
Through this free government which we have enjoyed,
An open field and a fair chance for your industry,
Enterprise and intelligence; that you may all have
Equal privileges in the race of life,
With all its desirable human aspirations.
It is for this the struggle should be maintained,
That we may not lose our birthright—
Not only for one, but for two or three years.
The nation is worth fighting for
To secure such an inestimable jewel."

Whenever Lincoln was deeply moved his thoughts seem to have shaped themselves naturally into poetry—the deeper his emotions, the more poetical their expression. Witness the following:

LETTER TO MRS. BIXLEY

"DEAR MADAM:

I have been shown in the files of the War Department
A statement of the Adjutant-General of Massachusetts
That you are the mother of five sons
Who have died gloriously on the field of battle. I feel
How weak and fruitless must be any words of mine
Which should attempt to beguile you from the grief
Of a loss so overwhelming. But I cannot refrain
From tendering to you the consolation that may be found
In the thanks of the Republic they died to save.
I pray that our Heavenly Father may assuage
The anguish of your bereavement, and leave you only
The cherished memory of the loved and lost,
And the solemn pride that must be yours to have laid
So costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom."

If anything, short of Divine Power itself, could assuage the anguish and give consolation to this almost unbelievably stricken mother, it should be found in words like those from a source like that.

The two following excerpts from the Second Inaugural Address seem to be further perfect illustrations of Lincoln's rare poetical quality:

EXTRACT FROM THE SECOND INAUGURAL ADDRESS

"On the occasion corresponding to this four years ago,
All thoughts were anxiously directed to an impending civil war.
All dreaded it,—all sought to avert it.
While the inaugural address was being delivered from this place,
Devoted altogether to saving the Union without war,
Insurgent agents were in the city seeking to destroy it without war,—
Seeking to dissolve the Union, and divide effects,
By negotiation. Both parties deprecated war; but one of them
Would make war rather than let the nation survive,
And the other would accept war rather than let it perish.
And the war came."

CONCLUSION OF THE SECOND INAUGURAL ADDRESS

"With malice toward none;
With charity for all;
With firmness in the right,
As God gives us to see the right,—
Let us strive on to finish the work we are in:
To bind up the nation's wounds;
To care for him who shall have borne the battle,
And for his widow and his orphan;
To do all which may achieve
And cherish a just and lasting peace
Among ourselves, and with all nations."

JAMES RAYMOND PERRY.